

*Luke 1:8-17; 3:1-6 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup>Once when he [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. . . . <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

<sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

*There are two seasons in the Christmas year that are focused on preparation: Advent and Lent. This week, we focus on God's preparations for the arrival of his Son and the preparer-in-chief, John the Baptizer.*

Yep . . . the Grinch hated Christmas. He hated the mistletoe wreaths. He hated the stockings. He hated all the *Who*-toys. He hated the noise and the feast, the *Who*-pudding and the rare *Who*-roast-beast. But mostly he hated all that *Who*-singing. For fifty-three years he'd put up with that ringing. And now, he'd end it, with one very big haul. The Grinch would stop Christmas from coming at all.

And so arrives the irony in the Grinch's story. All his preparations for his night of Christmas stealing would be his undoing. From his donning of the St. Nick garb to the

### John the Baptizer

Advent is to be a time of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Christ, God's Messiah. And the second Sunday of Advent is traditionally focused upon John the Baptist, God's messenger of preparation and repentance.

John the Baptizer was a cousin of Jesus, born to an elderly couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah (see Luke 1:5-24). The angel Gabriel brought the news of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy, telling Zechariah that his son would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). Mary, Jesus' mother, was related to Elizabeth.

John was about six months older than his cousin, Jesus, and began his public ministry at the age of thirty or so. He preached a message of renewal enacted by a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). John washed people in the Jordan river, a powerful symbol of Israel's salvation. Huge crowds came to the river to be cleansed by John the baptizer. Even Jesus came to be baptized by John. Not long after, John was imprisoned by King Herod and executed.

sleigh he found lying in the yard, from his antlers for Max to his soon-to-be-stuffed sacks, the Grinch was paving the way for his new heart.

### *Preparation*

I guess anything that is really important takes preparation. All the Grinch's careful plans impelled him toward a confrontation that would change him forever. The Grinch's transformation was a big project and much had to be made ready for his epiphany early on a Christmas morning

#### The Birth of John the Baptizer

John's father was a priest named Zechariah. On the day that Zechariah is to serve in the temple, the angel Gabriel interrupts Zechariah's incense offering to tell him of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

The Jews had waited hundreds of years for the arrival of their deliverer, their Messiah and, surely, many Jews had given up hope that they would ever see the decisive acts of God. Similarly, Zechariah and Elizabeth had long ago given up hope of ever having children. But just as God burst in upon their lives, giving them a son, God announces that he would soon end the Jews' wait and burst in upon human history, bringing it to a climax in Jesus Christ.

Just as the announcement of John's birth precedes the announcement of his cousin's birth, so Luke tells of us John's birth before he tells us the story of Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:57-80).

When Elizabeth's baby is born, the neighbors are overjoyed. At the infant's circumcision ceremony, he is about to be named Zechariah, after his father, when Elizabeth announces that he is to be named John. Zechariah agrees to the naming and, at that moment, his speech is restored! The story is told throughout the area causing people to wonder, "What then is this child going to be?" They know, as Luke writes, that "indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." Having recovered his speech, Zechariah pronounces a lengthy blessing upon his son, John. John "will be called the prophet of the Most High" and "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

Of course, as big a project as saving the Grinch might be, God's project to save humanity and all the cosmos was infinitely larger. Paul wrote that it wasn't just us humans who needed saving, all creation groaned awaiting its redemption too (Romans 8:19-23).

So God set about to put things right. He gave his people the Law of Moses so that we might be able to understand just how far short we fall of loving God and neighbor. As we saw last week, it is pretty hard to embrace a solution if you don't even acknowledge the problem. In this way, the OT Law was like a magnifying glass on a sunny day, concentrating and focusing the sins of the world into one place and on one person, who could never plead ignorance. They knew quite well that they were to care for widows and orphans, honor their parents, and never worship any other gods.

And God sent them prophets. One after another, the prophets helped the people to see their separation from God and one another. The prophets warned them of the consequences of their neglect of God and one another. And the prophets brought God's promise that one day all would be put right. All of this was preparation, necessary preparation, for what was still to come.

#### *The preparer*

Then, finally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> year or so of the reign of Caesar Augustus, God began to roll out the plan that had been promised long before. Though the specifics were completely unexpected, the results were not. We and all creation would be reconciled to God in less than forty years from that day.

Gabriel, an angel, came to a very old couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and promised them the baby that they thought they could never have. This child would be the

preparer, the one who would announce to all who would listen that the day had finally come. God was about to keep all the promises that God had made. It was now a time to repent and make oneself ready for the coming of the Lord.

### The Baptisms by John

John's baptism is a one-time rite in preparation of God's approaching salvation. Its roots may well go back to the Old Testament association of the Spirit's presence and washing (Ezek 36:25-27). Though John makes clear that Jesus is the one who brings the Spirit (Lk 3:15-17), John's baptism pictures a preparation for what God will do in Jesus.

Still, John's baptism differs from Christian baptism. John's baptism looks forward, while Christian baptism assumes Jesus' provision of the Spirit. John's baptism anticipates the Spirit's coming, while Christian baptism reflects the Spirit's arrival through Jesus. The washing aspect of John's baptism allows it to be associated with forgiveness of sins, as its connection to the Ezekiel 36 imagery suggests. Here are people of contrite heart, looking to God expectantly for what he will do in the days to come. Acts 19:1-10 reinforces the picture that John's baptism is anticipatory and not an end in itself: when some disciples appear in Ephesus who only knew John's baptism, they are led by Paul to experience what John's washing anticipated—the experience of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:15-17; Acts 10:37-38; 13:23-24). When an Israelite takes John's baptism, he or she is declaring openness to God and his ways. The nation is put on notice to await the rest of God's promise.

This message is why Luke cites Isaiah 40:3-5, with its promise of the coming of God's salvation. This Isaiah text is a "pattern" prophecy, speaking to many periods of history at the same time. In Isaiah, these verses introduce the entire second section of the book, which presents God's saving program for Israel, starting with deliverance from exile and ending in the utopian existence described in Isaiah 65-66.

Not long after, Gabriel returned, this time to visit Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, a young girl engaged to be married. Gabriel announced to Mary that she would give birth to the Son of the Most High, the one for whom Elizabeth's baby was to pave the way.

Elizabeth's baby would be named John. When he began his ministry in the late 20's AD, he became known as John the Baptizer. (See the accompanying text box for more on John's baptisms.)

It was John who lived out the promises brought by Isaiah of one who would see that the world was made ready for the coming of God's Son or, as Isaiah put it, the crooked was made straight and the rough made smooth.

John called the people to repent, that is, to shed their old lives and embrace God's way, to make themselves ready, to be cleansed, and to be born anew.

### *Advent*

It is the season when we bury ourselves in our Christmas preparations, but for most of us those preparations consist of shopping, present-wrapping, decorating inside and out. How much do we really do to prepare ourselves for the arrival of our Lord? How often do we even contemplate the meaning of Christmas in the midst of all our busyness, at least outside Sunday morning, Saturday evening worship, or Wednesday evening (at Encounter!!).

But, like the Grinch, our hearts need to be made ready. Just as John immersed fellow Jews in the Jordan River, so we need to immerse ourselves in the genuinely Christian meaning of Christmas. Each year the questions seem to be the same. How will we, this year, embrace the Christ in Christmas? How will we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord? How will we do our part to pave the way for our new hearts?

## Darrell Bock on John the Baptist

In his commentary on Luke's Gospel, Darrell Bock, takes a deeper look at John the Baptizer and his ministry. Here's an excerpt:

"Like a painting placed inside a beautiful frame, John the Baptist's ministry (3:2b-3) is bracketed between the historical context (3:1-2a) and the context of Old Testament hope (3:4-6). Among the Gospel writers, only Luke takes the time to mention leaders in power at various political levels when John appeared. Luke is also unique in emphasizing the extent to which John's coming represents a renewed realization of the promise of Isaiah 40:3-5. For Isaiah, the initial fulfillment of seeing God's hand had been in the deliverance from exile during the period of Cyrus the Great, as later chapters of Isaiah note. Now the pattern of God's working to deliver his people is renewed in the word of a *voice of one calling in the desert*. God approaches, and creation is to level all geographical obstacles to prepare for his coming, as if rolling out a great red carpet. This leveling includes seeking contriteness of heart (Is 57:14-17).

In listing Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, Luke surveys the political and religious leadership from the most distant to the more directly involved authorities. The note about Tiberius's fifteenth year allows us to date the start of John's ministry. Assuming the calendar being used is a Roman one, John's ministry began somewhere during A.D. 28-29. The dating of this starting point is related to the dating of Jesus' ministry, which probably ended in A.D. 33 (though many date the end of his ministry in A.D. 30). Annas and Caiaphas are both called high priests, although only one high priest existed at a time. This description appears to be a case of a person of high office keeping his title even after leaving office, much like an ex-president or ex-governor today. Pilate and Herod reappear only briefly in 9:7-9 and 23:1-25, but both rulers are much discussed in ancient Jewish sources. Philip and Lysanias were the other regional tetrarchs of the period. They, like Herod, were descendants of Herod the Great, who ruled the entire area when Jesus was born.

John's ministry begins during this period. He ministers in the wilderness, brings *the word of God* and preaches a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. The concept of repentance is central to Luke. Not only is its concrete character elaborated in 3:10-14, but Jesus, in his Great Commission in 24:43-47, makes it clear that the roots of the concept come from the Old Testament. Though the Greek term for repentance means "a change of mind," the Semitic concept involves a "turning," an attitude that brings a change of direction (1 Kings 8:47; 13:33; Ps 78:34; Is 6:10; Ezek 3:19; Amos 4:6). Other texts in Luke emphasize this term (5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10). On this point Jesus and John echo one another. It is a contrite heart that comes to God for forgiveness, one who knows the need of a spiritual physician (5:31-32). A walk with God means submission to him and a change of direction."

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. John proclaims a baptism, a plunging, of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To repent is not simply to be sorry for what you've done, but to turn 180° from the direction you've been headed. Thus, people brought their sins to the river, were plunged into it by John, and, metaphorically at least, crossed the river into God's renewed people. In practice, most of us find it pretty hard to leave behind all our sins and regrets. It much more likely that we'll hang on to them until we drown in the river! How do we go about truly leaving behind all our "baggage" – our sins, our mistakes, our regrets – and embracing the true meaning of Advent and Christmas? How do we truly, practically, receive the forgiveness freely offered us by God?
2. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of preparation. But I'm not so sure that we view Advent as a time of preparation. Should we? You might consider what Advent means to you. What would it mean to *prepare* for Christmas (and I don't mean getting the tree up!). What you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons, like Lent and Advent, at all? Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the church calendar. It is the beginning of the new Christian year. Why would the beginning of Advent be the beginning of the year? What does this signify about our faith?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Isaiah 40:1-11</b> The promised coming of God's kingdom. Mark draws in part on this passage to open his Gospel.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Luke 1:5-24</b> The announcement and birth of John the Baptist</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Luke 3:1-22</b> Luke's telling of John's ministry at the Jordan River</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 3:1-21</b> Jesus and Nicodemus talk about rebirth.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Matthew 14:1-13</b> The death of John the Baptist</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

